



SIGAR

Office of the Special Inspector General  
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

## LESSONS LEARNED RECORD OF INTERVIEW

<b>Project Title and Code:</b>
LL-01 – Strategy and Planning
<b>Interview Title:</b>
Interview with (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) [REDACTED]
<b>Interview Code:</b>
LL-01 [REDACTED]
<b>Date/Time:</b>
10/23/2015; 1400-1500
<b>Location:</b>
(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) [REDACTED]
<b>Purpose:</b>
To elicit interviewee's thoughts on U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.
<b>Interviewees:</b> (Either list interviewees below, attach sign-in sheet to this document or hyperlink to a file)
<b>SIGAR Attendees:</b>
Candace Rondeaux, Matthew Sternenberger
<b>Sourcing Conditions (On the Record/On Background/etc.):</b> On the record. Must approve quotes.
<b>Recorded:</b> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Recording File Record Number (if recorded):</b>
<b>Prepared By:</b> (Name, title and date)
Matthew Sternenberger
<b>Reviewed By:</b> (Name, title and date)
<b>Key Topics:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Interagency</li><li>• Missed Opportunities</li><li>• (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) [REDACTED]</li><li>• Pakistan</li><li>• Afghanistan's Initial Exposure</li><li>• Planning Cultures</li><li>• Lessons Learned</li></ul>

### The Interagency

Relations among agencies was less than stellar across the board. Afghanistan was not sui generis as it was. I can't tell you if it was worse or better than other things. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] SP was within the department and the role I was ultimately given for the department was somewhat a one-off. It was just different. For the most part, the Assistant Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, the



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Undersecretary, or the Secretary did the interagency stuff. I would talk to a lot of them all the time, but I was very rarely a participant myself in the interagency process.

In terms of Afghanistan, I don't recall it being a big issue before 9/11. It may have come up but I just don't remember. Obviously, very quickly afterwards [of 9/11] you had the challenge to the [Afghan] government that they didn't meet. Then you had that somewhat longer than expected process of mounting an effort to oust the government. I would say it was (b)(3) the Pentagon in a support role. That just took longer than expected and frustrated everybody. So you had that track and, ultimately, you had the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif. Malcom Gladwell would probably call that the tipping point. People like me have been arguing that you need to establish a momentum and that once you have established a momentum, things would fall into place rather quickly. I argued strongly for focusing our efforts on a sizeable town that would fall to create a sense of momentum or inevitability, which we thought would be self-fulfilling. So you had that dynamic and you had the whole Pakistan dynamic.

I think in general, the initial policy was right but I think we dropped the ball on the follow-up. I think we were right to basically tell the Pakistanis that things had to change and we needed them to do certain things differently. (b)(1) - 1.4(D)

I think that a discipline was lost on the Pakistan relationship. In terms of Afghanistan, it became clear that the normal interagency process wasn't going to work. I am not quite sure why that became clear, but I can't even remember who had that hat at the White House. It makes sense that it was him [Zal Khalilzad] at the White House. At State you had the South Asia Bureau. At Defense, they had the various military and civilian sides. I think that people felt that this was sufficiently high profile. I think this came about during a conversation between Powell and the President. Suddenly, I was given this role to coordinate policy toward Afghanistan. I think the feeling was that we didn't have a lot of time. If you remember, you had this intelligence and military track to oust a government, and the question was, what do we do if, and when, we succeed?

The feeling was that we needed to kind of go from zero to sixty, so the sense I got, (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) was that there was about a half a dozen different areas of activity. One was the military intelligence track to bring about change, another was about bringing about a successor and the political track that ultimately led to Bonn and James Dobbins' role. There was a humanitarian track and several others. I know there were 5 or 6 rings or tracks to this stuff. The details of the intelligence/military track were left to the channel. People were left with the 'everything else' and putting together a process that would lead to a viable legitimate government. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) working on the Humanitarian side with all the NGOs. We were worried that with the collapse of authority, you could have a real humanitarian crisis. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)

we brought together people from around the government, not a lot of Defense participation, but mainly State and a lot of people from USAID. I don't think Zal came, I think there were others. We also often had the NGO types. I would sometimes bring in people from the outside. That was one of the first times doing that in government – that it was wasn't enough to have just the narrowly define, traditional interagency process. Sometimes we would actually bring in people, whether it was MSF or the IRC. I remember [we did this] on certain occasions because we were worried about refugee issues or internally displaced people. Also when we were worried about food issues or health issues.

What you didn't want to have was a situation where you succeed in ousting a government [with no follow-up plans]. We were all painfully familiar of what happened the last time around. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)

At that point, you had one bureau that had responsibility for the Middle East, Persian Gulf and South Asia. So actually in 1989, the first interagency meeting of 41's presidency was about Afghanistan. The question was about the Soviet troop withdrawal was pegged to February 15, 1989. That was only about three weeks after we got into office. So we were, shall we say, scrambling, as a new administration to have a policy in place. At times it was a race between



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the Soviets departing and us trying to figure out a new interagency policy for the new administration. Obviously, it had been less than a complete success ultimately given what had happened in the collapse of the Northern Alliance government and the Taliban coming into power. There was a sense, needless to say, that if at all possible, we wanted to avoid a repeat of what was seen as a slow motion disaster that took place in the 90's and in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal.

### Missed Opportunities

**What I mainly remember was the interagency conversations and the widespread reluctance to get involved and widespread reluctance to get ambitious in Afghanistan. It was never voiced in my presence, let's hold back in Afghanistan because of what we want to do down the road in Iraq. What I did hear, time and time again from just about everybody, and if I can summarize in the vernacular, was that you have to be crazy if you want to get ambitious in Afghanistan.** I was pushing initially that we should get involved a little bit and I was suggesting something like a force of roughly two divisions. One of which would be American. It would be about 40,000 to 50,000 presence and we would do roughly half of it. I had spoken to some people. Was it what you wanted ideally, no, but I thought it was about as much traffic as the bridge could bear. I made the argument that if we were willing to do it, we could get others to do it. Second of all, I thought that there was an opening and I didn't know how long it would last. With the demise and the ouster of the government, you had a vacuum. The United States was temporarily to be welcomed, but then how long would the welcome last given the nature of Afghanistan and its history of being suspicious of foreigners and outsiders? I thought there was time and space to do something. The last thing we wanted was a situation where things kind of backtrack. Ten years from then, we were facing similar situation. I couldn't sell the idea. There was no enthusiasm. There was a profound sense of a lack of possibility in Afghanistan. It didn't excite anybody.

**This was different from Iraq. It seemed that people believed that if you succeeded in Iraq, that it would set a model for the rest of the region. People thought it would be a model that other countries could not resist because they believed if one Arab state went one way, the others would follow. That was the argument that was made, I didn't buy it, but that that was what was made. With Afghanistan you could not make the argument in two ways. [First] you couldn't make the argument that this was a society ripe to be democratic; that was a stretch. Second of all, even if that was dually unrealistic, it would not going to be a model for others. It would not going to be a positive domino experience. It would be one-off. There was a feeling of almost historically-based pessimism about what you could accomplish there. I could not prove that I was right. I could not say that if we do x, y, and z, and that good things follow. I could not say that if we do x, y, and z that terrible things will ensue. You are dealing with prediction, conjecture, and analysis.**

I think the default option was, once we got rid of the government by largely working with the locals, let's not get any more involved than we have to. It was a minimalism approach. We will help these guys setup a government and a bit economically and on the humanitarian side, but we are not going to do anything that smacks of nation building in Afghanistan. That turned out to be a nonstarter. What I think that meant, again I can't prove that I am right, there was an opportunity to do something. **The window there closed. My sense is that psychologically and politically, in a funny sort of way, went back to being Afghan-like. I don't mean that to be disparaging - culturally and normally - competitions reassert themselves. We were not willing to make a significant investment.**

I remember in the interagency that we were around the table and there was the President, Condi, Powell and Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld came in with a big stack of papers, as he oft did, and Cheney was at some undisclosed location on the screen. I remember a briefing during which half the meeting the economic coordinator (might have been Andrew Natsios) reported on his side of things, and I reported on mine. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) There just was not any appetite for what you might call an ambitious policy. The feeling was that you could put a lot into it and you wouldn't get a lot out of it. I would not call it cynical, I would call it pessimistic about



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what the relationship between investment and return in Afghanistan. There just was not a lot of enthusiasm for it. I think people felt that it would settle back and as long as it didn't become an awful place or a government that let back in al-Qaeda, there was a minimalist goals. There was not much enthusiasm, to say the least, to change Afghanistan. I would say the bottom line position was our policy is not to shape Afghanistan, it is simply to make sure that the Taliban can't operate of there or come back. I would say that is when the interagency consensus emerged.

No, [there was not a reconstruction strategy for the first few years]. You had the success of putting together the Karzai government. Bonn was okay. You had the military success of ousting people and the success of Bonn where you put together a government with Karzai and company. I think that after that there was not a sense of great purpose or priority. It was not so much an interagency failure so much that the government got the policy that it was comfortable with, which was a fairly low priority policy.

**(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)**

**(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)** There is a White House announcement so that was easy to check out. It was pretty soon after 9/11. I have not read his [Dov Zakheim] book, but I heard some comment. I laughed when I read that [he did not know what my role was]. He is a good guy. My relations with several of his colleagues was less than perfect, but Dov was somebody I have always had an animus relationship with. **(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)**

**[REDACTED]** given the 5 or 6 tracks out of Afghan policy, the idea was that the security track would largely be held by the Pentagon with a little bit of **(b)(3)** stuff. That was off to the side. That is not a justification or excuse for the lack of coordination, but there was a sense that that was not in our mandate when I was given the role. All I am saying is that the focus was much more on standing up the government and preventing a humanitarian crisis. I think October 2001. Less than a year later, I was out of this role essentially. **[REDACTED]**

**(b)(5)**

When you create a special coordinator **(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)** it is a slightly extra bureaucratic response, but at some point, it is not sustainable. You need to put things back into the bureaucracy for better and for worse. **[REDACTED]** have the staff or the bandwidth. So after 9/11 I could devote a lot of time to this, but once things started to get back to normal, then all of the other U.S. government policy in general, was not as fixated on the narrow thrust post-9/11 policy. The South Asia Bureau's enthusiasm for my appointment was finite. Once the crisis ebbed, it was just too hard to continue this and too many other things to do. There was a sense of pushing it back into the bureaucracy; let the South Asia Bureau do its thing, let the Pentagon do its thing, and let the White House do its thing. What hadn't changed, and I don't know all of the details, but to an extent the policy didn't succeed because the policy never received the attention or priority. By then it is history and Iraq and moved to the fore and Afghanistan never captured, it sounds odd, but it never captured people's imagination.

### Pakistan

The feeling on the other side was okay, so you ousted the Taliban, al-Qaeda was pushed out, and then the real thing was how do you knit together that society. **(b)(1) - 1.4(D)** **[REDACTED]**





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(b)(1) - 1.4(D)

### Afghanistan's Initial Exposure

There were not a lot of people in the government that had much familiarity with Afghanistan. Again, what had been the American experience? Virtually none before, what you might call the mujahedeen era, where Afghanistan was simply a place where an indirect, anti-Soviet struggle was played out. (b)(1) - 1.4(D)

There was a lot of focus on the short term of arming the muj[ahedeen] and inflicting pain on the Soviets. There was not a lot of though, if any, what this would ultimately do to terrorism, to terrorism, to Afghanistan, or to Pakistan.

After 1989 and the initial meetings, our interests largely turned to other things. Whether it was worrying about Israelis or Palestinians, or 16 months later the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. **So Afghanistan, for the rest of that Bush administration and the early Clinton administration, was mired in its own internecine struggles.** You then finally had the Taliban coming back, but even that was not seen as a major crisis or setback. It was disappointment kind of. Until 9/11 it was not a setback that had real direct consequences for the United States. I think the only disconnect in the policy was why after that were we not prepared to do a little bit more. That would have meant putting more pressure on Pakistan and making more of an investment in Afghanistan, particularly on the security side. It would not have required nothing like the massive presence we ended up having. **I was never talking about 100,000 plus people. I was talking about a very narrow mission. A mission not much different than we have now.** Training and arming in a limited role. It was a very limited [plan]. It was almost that classic indirect role. It was seen as too much and that that is ironic given where we ended up. In retrospect, it looks like a bargain. At the time it looked like high cost and a low likelihood of payoff.

### Planning Cultures

I don't think that State has a strong analytic or planning culture. It is not akin to the Foreign Service culture, which is more a reporting and describing culture. State does not have that many horses or forces to put on the ground. What would be your [State] big plan for Afghanistan? If you are planning for a security situation that really quickly gets you into Defense or into intelligence. We played a large role in standing up a government. That was not planning so much as good old fashion on the ground statecraft. Planning divorced from implementation does not get you a whole lot. You also have a policy staff but ideally the best planning would be done in the Bureaus. (b)(5) (b)(5)

At State you have a bifurcation of the day-to-day operating and the planning. I think that is probably, not healthy. Ideally you have a policy planning staff that is closely integrated with the rest of the building. It can work, but depends on who populates the staff, what kind of relationship they have with the building, and what kind of relationship they have with the seventh floor. What usually happens is that by in large, the policy planning staffs that have the highest profile don't plan, they just become operational. They are not planning stuff, but are just an extra operating area that reports more to the Secretary than it is focused on the stuff geographical bureaus do.

### Lessons Learned

1. We have not been very systematic about drawing lessons. We have done this a lot of time and you would think we would be better at it.
2. I don't think this should be the work of the State Department. This whole idea that the State Department should be involved with this peace building and reconstruction is not what Foreign Service Officers are trained to do or why they go in. State Department should be focused on diplomacy. Some version of USAID ought to exist if that is what we want to do. We ought to bring back something like that and think about it from everything from

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benign environments where you can focus on the challenges at hand (education, agricultural or language programs) to more demanding situations. This was a new role for the State Department. (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C)

it was one thing to ask an organization or institution to take on a new task that was one step removed from its standard operating procedures that it had. To ask an institution to take on a task that is fundamentally different that doesn't build upon existing operating procedures, but essentially coexists with them, doesn't work. This was a real misunderstanding about what the State Department could and should do. This whole on the ground reconstruction job in these messy situations just haven't worked and I think there is zero surprise about that.

3. I agree with you that we don't plan well and we don't anticipate well. If you look at the Arab Spring, we got virtually every call wrong. In the case of Iraq, there were papers that were written (I know because I wrote them) that warned against doing certain things or said that if you are going to do this war, here is how to plan for the aftermath. We wrote the memo and pretty much every piece of advice was systematically ignored. There it was not a lack of a planning function, people just chose not to listen. Fine, that is their prerogative. What I don't know is if good analysis and planning was produced and was not listened to or just not produced. I don't know the answer to that. It seems to me that, by in large, this administration, the periphery seems weakened.
4. (b)(5)

I don't see a disciplined planning function. It may exist and people may have warned against all sorts of things, but if that is the case, then an awful lot of people ignored sensible analysis and prediction. More likely it was not produced or read at high levels. I am a pretty big critic of how we have done with this fairly *ahistoric* advantage inheritance we had after the Cold War and it doesn't seem to me we have had a lot to show for it. If anything now, if you were measuring levels of disorder, it is more disorderly and it is hard to think when it was more disorderly than it is now. A lot of the trend lines are worrisome internationally. We have a lot of trend lines that are worrisome domestically and that is a toxic combination. I hate to be pessimistic or negative but I am a genuinely worried. This whole, what we used to call the Arc of Crisis that was self-fulfilling. This has not become an arc of crisis. I was the first to suggest a Thirty Years War analogy. This will churn for a long time and I don't think we have bottomed out yet. I think Afghanistan, some of the arrows are pointing in the wrong direction. I worry about Saudi Arabia. I don't think places called Iraq and Syria are ever going to come back in a recognizable form. What is going on in Jerusalem has got to scare people. The odd of some Temple Mount crisis are really high. You have got the greater Middle East churning. You have the fundamental problem and Pakistan. You have North Korea and a certain reemergence of major power politics on top of all of that. You have new global challenges like cyber. There is a lot on the plate. I am just not sure that either the world is up to managing it or if the world is up to managing it. So I sit here (b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C) in New York and I worry about it. I genuinely worry about it.